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ABSTRACT

This report discusses findings on the shortage of qualified teachers for students with disabilities. Data from the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 1992 Teacher Followup Survey of the National Center for Education Statistics, along with annual data reported by the Office of Special Education Programs and other data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, were analyzed to reveal the reasons underlying the demand for hiring more teachers in special education at the national level. Results indicate that the number of teaching positions in special education increased steadily during a recent 9-year period and that positions for special education teachers grew at a higher rate than positions for general education teachers. The annual demand for newly hired teachers in special education in 1990-91 was 14 percent of the total teaching positions in this field, a figure that was almost twice the percentage of openings for newly hired teachers in general education. There is also an annual shortage of about 28,000 fully certified teachers needed to replace employed special education teachers who are not fully certified in their main teaching assignment. The report concludes there are more opportunities for teaching positions in special education than in general education. (CR)

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From the Series on Teacher Availability in Special Education: Volume 1

How Many Qualified Teachers Are Needed for Students with Disabilities?

Lynne H. Cook, Ph.D.

Erling E. Boe, Ph. D.

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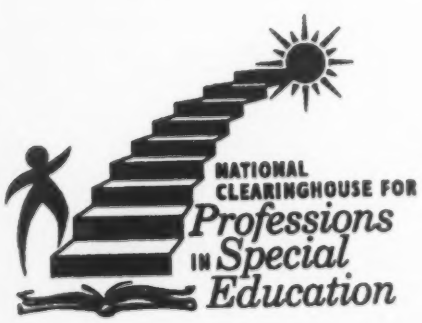

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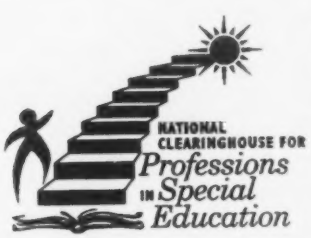

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The shortage of qualified teachers for students with disabilities has been a major challenge for two decades and will continue to be so as the need for special education teachers (SETs) continues to expand in the years to come (Boe, Cook, Kaufman, & Danielson, 1996). Yet little nationally representative information has been published about this vital topic, though there have been many anecdotal reports from the field about serious shortages of SETs in particular schools and districts.

Fortunately, a large amount of data about the nation's teaching force has been collected through the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the 1992 Teacher Followup Survey of the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. These data are supplemented by data that are collected annually for Congressional reporting by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education, and by other data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (i.e., its Common Core of Data). These four databases were analyzed to reveal the reasons underlying the demand for hiring more teachers in special education at the national level.

Teacher shortage is a function of supply and demand. When the demand for SETs exceeds the available supply, there is a shortage of teachers. Overall demand for teachers in public schools is most realistically defined by the number of teaching positions that have been created and funded nationally. The demand to hire additional SETs each year is determined by a combination of factors, including

- The number of newly created teaching positions in special education.
- The number of SETs who transfer out of special education to general education.
- The number of SETs who leave the teaching profession for other activities.
- The number of SETs who continue in the field but lack full qualifications for their special education teaching assignment.

If the need to hire SETs caused by these factors is not met by a sufficient supply of qualified individuals, there is a teacher shortage in special education.

Information is presented here that describes the level of demand for teachers in special education, the factors responsible for producing teacher demand, and some of the important ways in which teacher demand in special education differs from that in general education. Only statistically significant differences between SETs and general education teachers (GETs) are discussed in this report.

Overall Teacher Demand

The overall demand for SETs and GETs in public schools, as defined by the number of teaching positions created and funded by the nation's 15,000 school districts, is shown in Figure 1 by year since 1984-85.[1] It is apparent that the demand for both SETs and GETs has grown steadily, and that the number of teaching positions in special education is about 15% of the number of positions in general education.

[1] The numbers presented in Figure 1 are actually the number of full-time equivalent teachers employed each year. Because over 99.5% of all teaching positions are filled, however, the number of teachers employed is virtually the same as the number of teaching positions created and funded by school districts.

Expansion of Teaching Positions

As seen in Figure 1, the number of teaching positions in special education has grown (i.e., expanded) at a somewhat higher rate than in general education. This trend is shown in greater detail in Figure 2, which demonstrates that special education teaching positions expanded by 20% from 1984-85 to 1993-94, while the comparable figure for general education was only 12%.

Because expansion of teaching positions creates an annual need to hire more teachers, the more rapid expansion of teaching positions in special education than in general education is one reason why SETs have more employment opportunities (in proportion to the size of the special education teaching force) than do GETs.

Annual Demand for Newly Hired Teachers

As distinguished from the total ongoing demand for teachers, there is also a large *annual* demand for *newly hired* teachers to fill *open* teaching positions in special education. Teaching positions become open for the following three reasons:

- Openings due to new teaching positions created in special education (i.e., expansion of teaching positions as shown in Figure 2).
- Openings due to SETs who transfer out to general education (i.e., out transfer).
- Openings due to SETs who leave the teaching profession (i.e. attrition).

Annual Demand Expressed as Percentages of Total Teachers Needed

The percentages of open teaching positions in special and general education created by the three components of annual demand for newly hired teachers, as just defined, are shown in Figure 3 for the school years 1988-89 and 1991-92. In 1991-92, the combined effect of these three sources of open positions created a demand for filling 14% of the total number of teaching positions in special education; the compa-

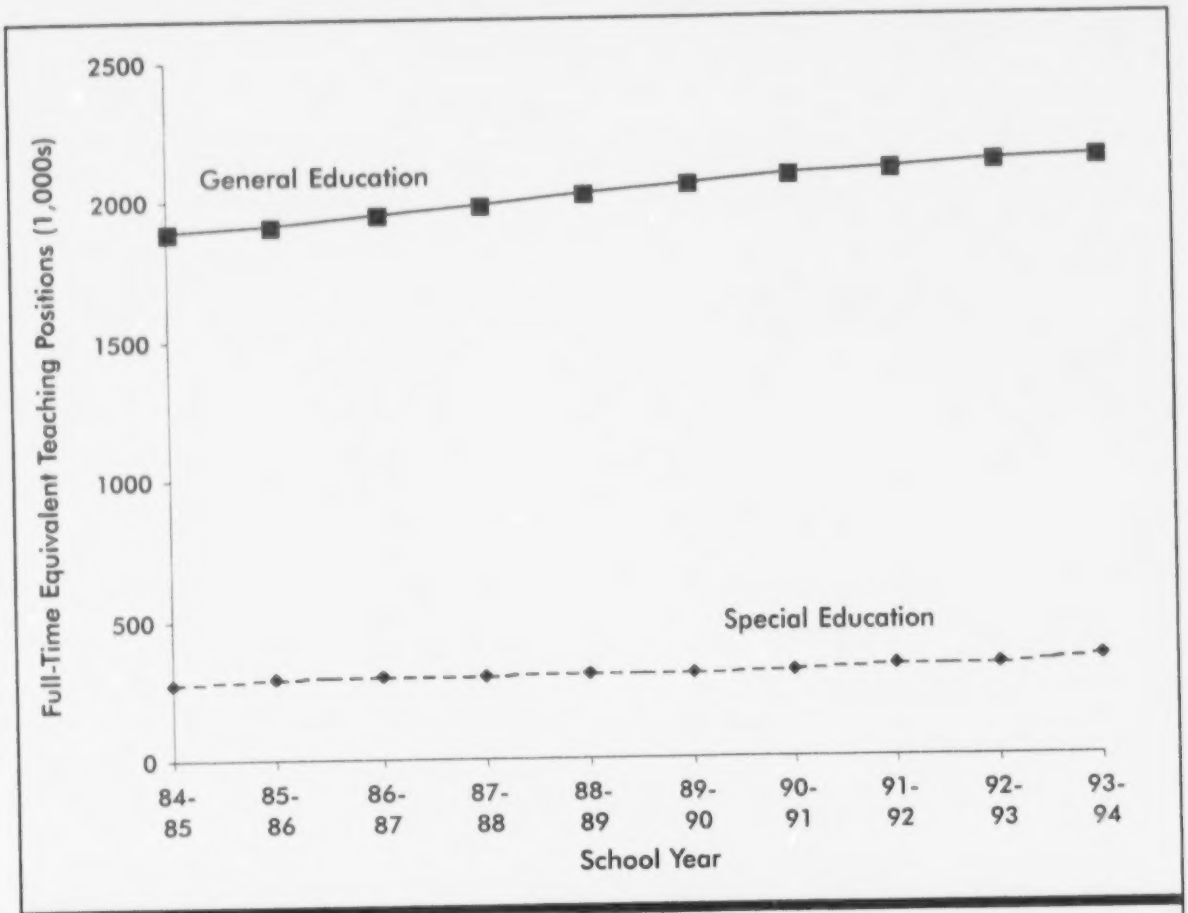

FIGURE 1. Full-Time Equivalent Teaching Positions (in Thousands) in Special and General Education, by School Year.

Data Sources: Congressional Reporting Database of the Office of Special Education Programs and the Common Core of Data of the National Center for Education Statistics, of the U.S. Department of Education.

rable demand in general education was only 8%. This is additional evidence of the greater employment opportunities in special education teaching than in general education.

The relative importance of the three different causes of open teaching positions in special education can also be seen in Figure 3. It is apparent that attrition from the profession and transfer to general education were the main (and approximately equal) reasons for positions to become open in special education. However, special education differed greatly from general education in this respect. While 5% of SETs transferred out to general education for the 1991-92 school year, fewer than 1% of GETs transferred into special education.

Figure 3 also shows a trend of declining attrition and transfer for both special education and general education over the 3-year period from 1988-89 to 1991-92. In fact, attrition of SETs from the profession, nationally, had declined in 1991-92 to the point where it was comparable, in percentage terms, to that in general education (about 6% for both fields).

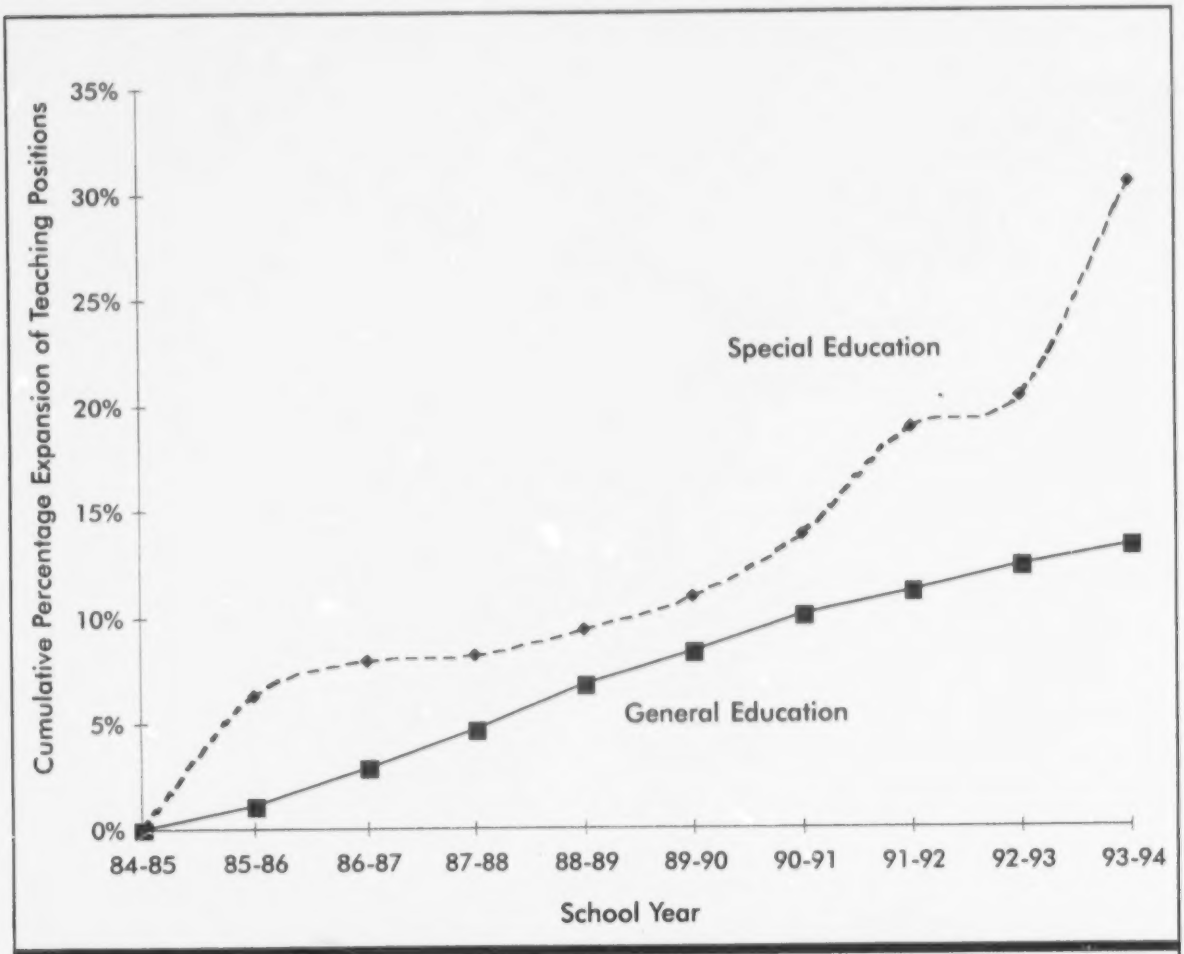

FIGURE 2. Cumulative Percentage Expansion of Teaching Positions in Special and General Education, by School Year.

Data Sources: Congressional Reporting Database of the Office of Special Education Programs and the Common Core of Data of the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. Department of Education.

Annual Demand Expressed as Numbers of Total Teachers Needed

The numbers of open teaching positions in special and general education created by the three components of annual demand are shown in Figure 4 for the school years 1988-89 and 1991-92. In 1991-92, the combined effect of these three sources of open positions was that 41,000 teaching positions in special education needed to be filled by newly hired teachers; the comparable number of open teaching positions in general education was 164,000. Thus, the number of open positions in special education was 25% of the number of open positions in general education. This relatively high percentage occurred in spite of the fact that the total special education teaching force was only 15% of the total general education teaching force as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 4 also shows that about 15,000 SETs transferred out to general education for 1991-92, while about 9,000 GETs transferred into special education.

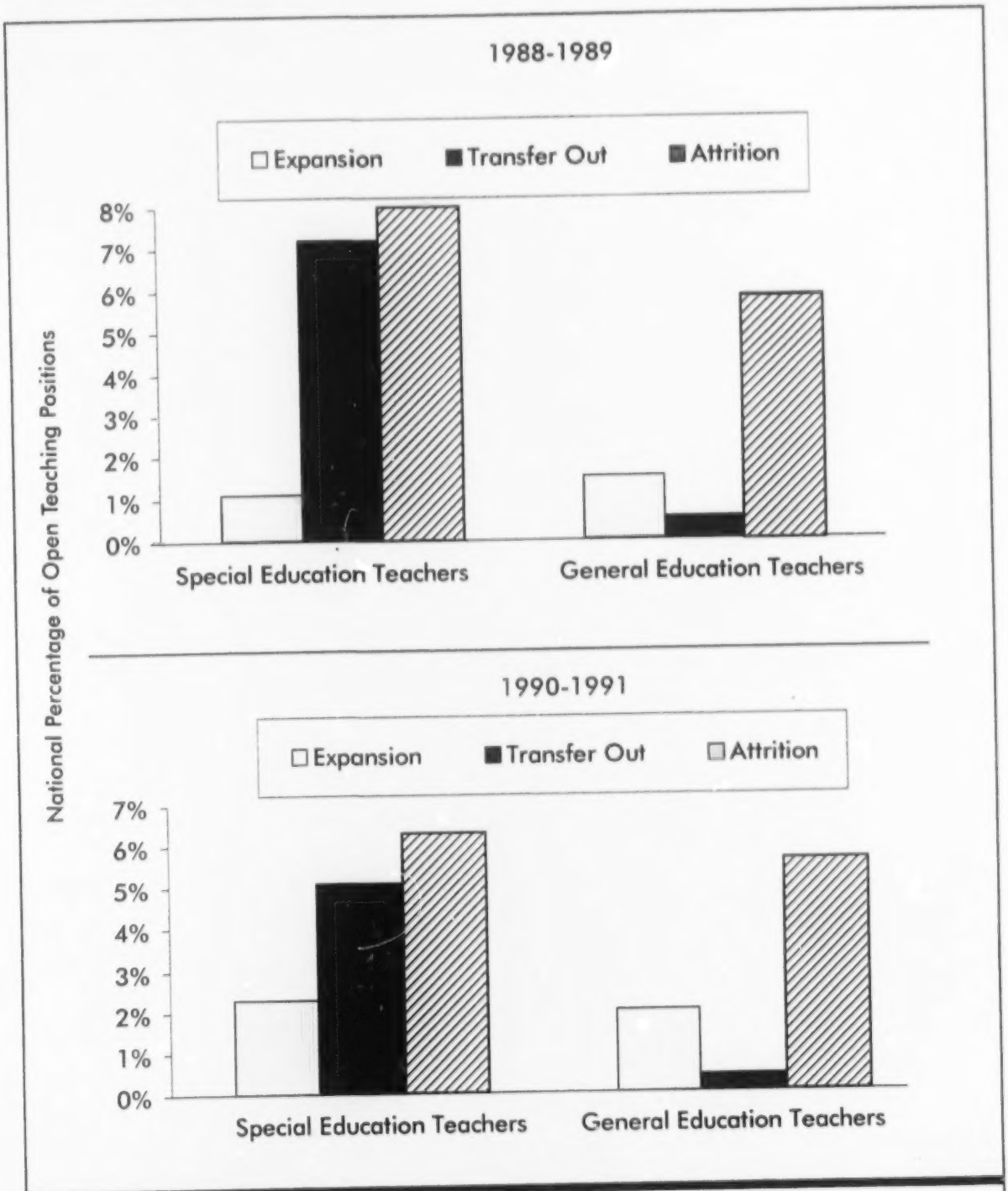

FIGURE 3. Sources of Open Teaching Positions As a Percentage of Total Teachers.

Data Sources: 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey, the Common Core of Data of the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Congressional Reporting Database of the Office of Special Education Programs, the U.S. Department of Education.

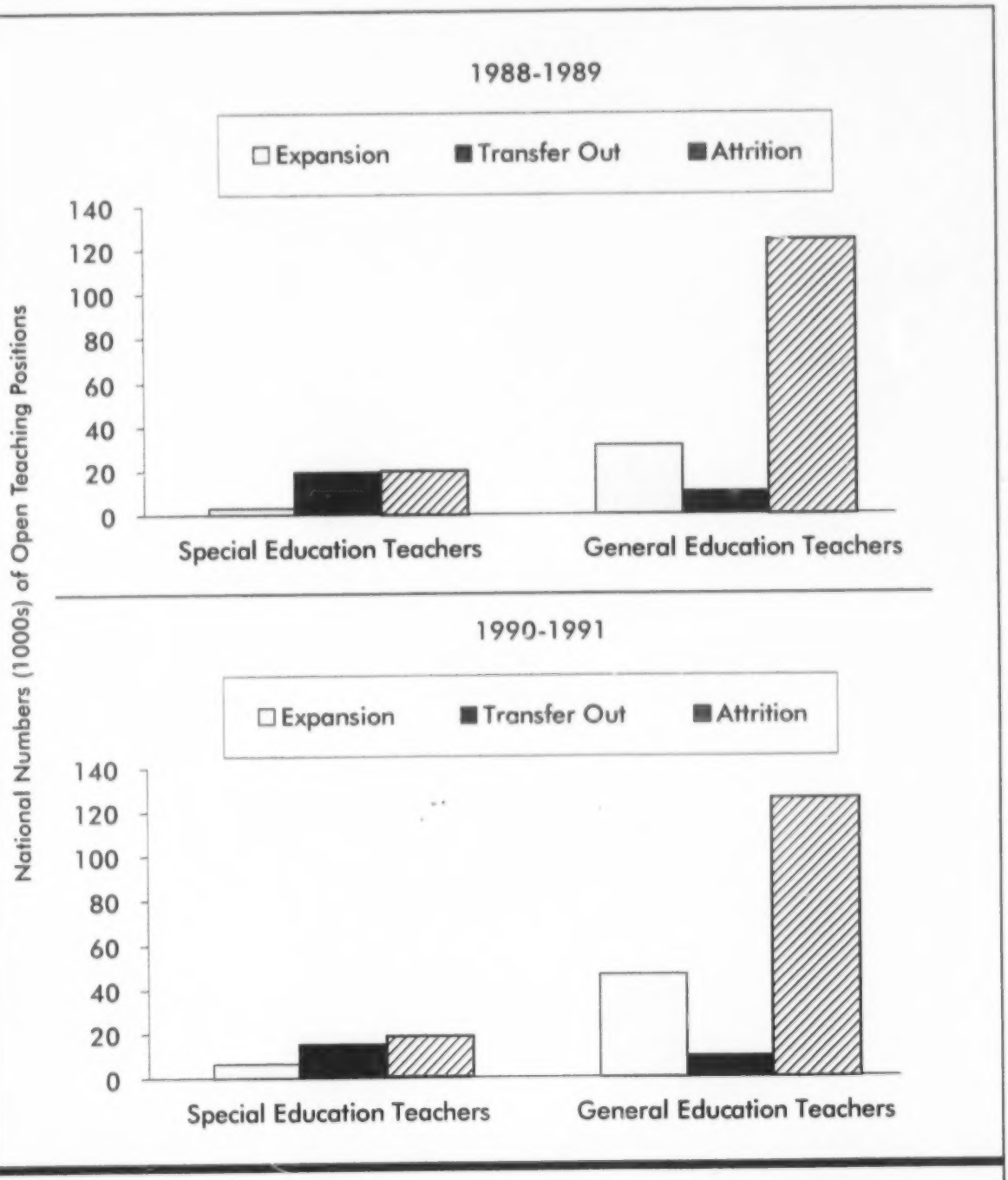

FIGURE 4. National Estimates of Open Teaching Positions (in Thousands), by Source of Openings.

Data Sources: 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey, the Common Core of Data of the National Center for Education Statistics, and the Congressional Reporting Database of the Office of Special Education Programs, the U.S. Department of Education.

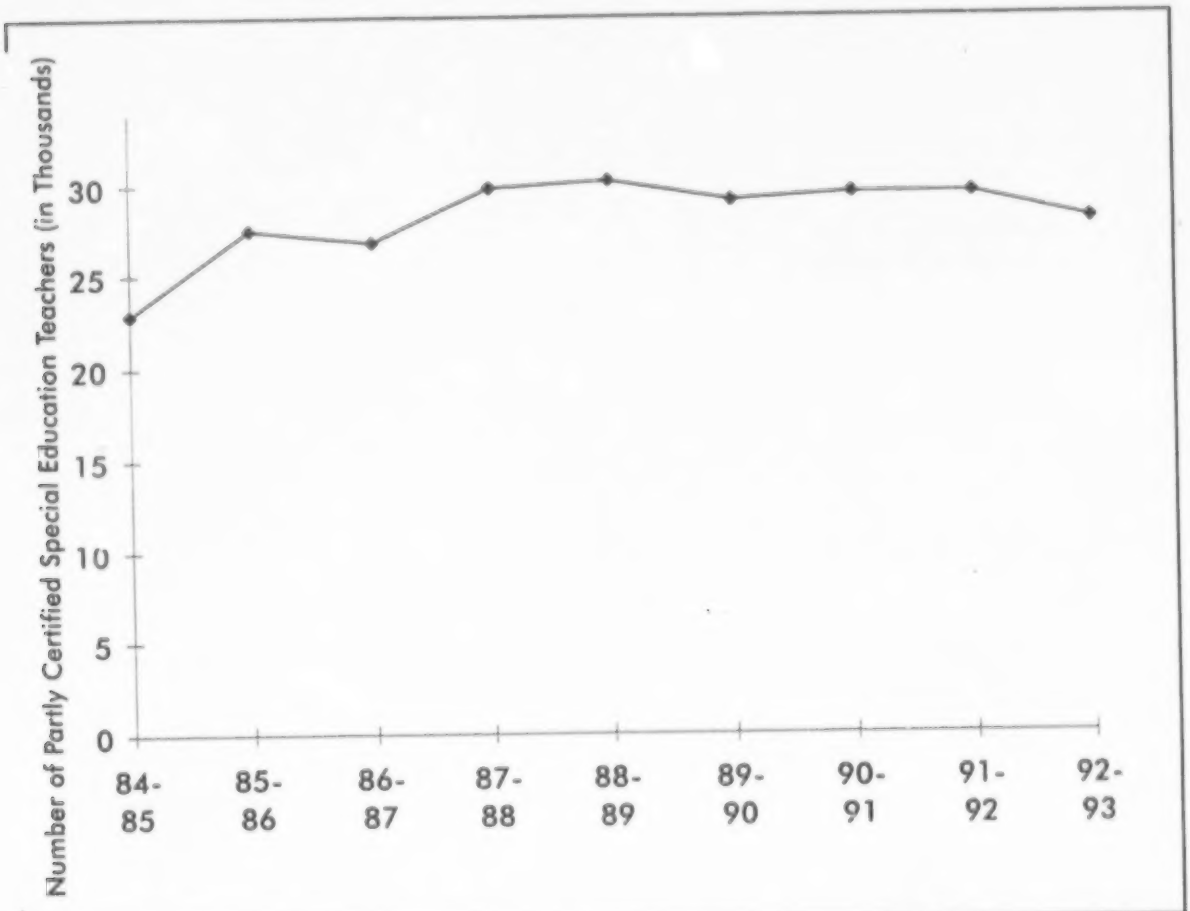

FIGURE 5. Full-Time Equivalent Teachers in Special Education Not Fully Certified in Their Main Teaching Assignment, by School Year.

Data Source: Congressional Reporting Database of the Office of Special Education Programs, the U.S. Department of Education.

This indicates that special education lost a net of about 6,000 teachers in the cross-field transfer of teachers between special and general education. Therefore, for 1991-92, special education needed to make up this net loss of 6,000 teachers to general education by hiring individuals into the teaching profession from various external sources. The supply of SETs recruited from various sources to fill open positions was reported by Boe, Cook, Kaufman, and Danielson (1996).

Shortage of Fully Certified Teachers

In addition to the large annual demand for newly hired teachers to fill open teaching positions in special education, there is an ongoing, chronic demand to hire fully certified replacements for teachers who are less than fully certified in their main teaching assignment. The numbers of SETs who are *not* fully certified in their main teaching assignment is shown, by year, in

Figure 5. This shortage of fully certified SETs remained fairly constant at 9% to 10% of the total number of SETs employed during the period from 1984-85 through 1992-93 (or 28,000 teachers during the latter year). Thus, even though virtually all teaching positions in special education are filled each year, there is a large and *chronic shortage* of about 28,000 fully certified SETs. This shortage could be eliminated if all currently employed teachers earned full certification in their teaching assignment or by hiring fully certified *replacement* teachers for those who lack full certification. Unfortunately, neither has occurred in sufficient numbers to close the gap. Consequently, there is an ongoing unmet need for about 28,000 fully certified SETs.

Directly comparable numbers for teacher shortage in general education are not available. Other information, however, indicates that the chronic shortage of fully certified GETs was 6% in 1990-91, a percentage considerably lower than the 10% shortage of fully certified teachers in special education (Cook & Boe, 1995). This circumstance is a further reason why there are more opportunities to be hired for teaching positions in special education than in general education.

Summary

The information reported here shows that the number of teaching positions in special education increased steadily during a recent 9-year period and that positions for special education teachers grew at a higher rate than positions for general education teachers. Of most interest to individuals who plan to become special education teachers is the large annual demand for newly hired teachers in this field. In fact, the annual demand for newly hired teachers in special education in 1990-91 was 14% of the total teaching positions in this field — a figure that was almost twice the percentage of openings for newly hired teachers in general education. Possibly most interestingly, the field of special education also experiences an annual shortage of about 28,000 fully certified teachers needed to replace employed special education teachers who are not fully certified in their main teaching assignment. For all of these reasons, there are more opportunities to be hired for teaching positions in special education than in general education.

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